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San Geronimo Golf Course puts up 10 boxes to help bluebird population under pressure from humans, competition

Mark Prado
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Western bluebirds are getting their own abodes on a Marin golf course in a move that will increase their numbers - and help the golf course avoid using pesticides to eliminate bugs that damage greens.

They're not on an endangered species list, but bird experts say local populations of the sprite, bright bluebirds are feeling the pressure of human activity as well as competition from non-native birds that seek the same nesting areas.

"They rely on cavities in old trees, but those trees are usually cut down," said Alex Godbe, director of the Hungry Owl Project, which runs the bluebird project. "But also we have non-native

invasive species that compete with them for these cavities, such as sparrows and starlings."

To help the



Tree Swallows also use these boxes and are also very beneficial eating insects on the wing. (Provided by The Hungry Owl Project)



Alex Godbe, Director for The Hungry Owl Project, checks Bluebird boxes at the San Geronimo Golf Course, in San Geronimo. (IJ photo/Robert Tong)

bluebirds, wooden boxes have been erected around the county, including 10 at the San Geronimo Golf Course west of Fairfax.

During the mating season, which begins in March, the boxes replicate the cavities in trees the birds seek.

"The boxes provide a safe habitat for them," said Godbe, as she stood by one of the bird homes mounted atop a 5-foot pole, a few feet from a putting green. "Being cavity nesters, the bluebirds readily take to the nest boxes, which simulate a natural tree cavity and provide an alternative safe place for them to nest and raise their young."

The boxes are monitored during the mating and nesting season to make sure other birds don't set up shop inside.

"By collecting data and providing stewardship we can

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make a positive impact on our native bird population," said Mari Litsky, coordinator of the bluebird program, who helps monitor and maintain the boxes.

This year seven boxes have nests in them with 18 bluebird eggs.

"Seeing the beautiful blue coloring of the birds is in itself worth the program," said Barry Mueller, superintendent at the golf course.

The female is more drab in color than the handsome bright male.

"Since the first boxes were installed two years ago, I have seen a marked increase in the number of bluebirds on the course. Hopefully the golfers, as they are playing their rounds, will look for, observe, and enjoy the bluebirds," Mueller said.

But the bluebirds bring more than just aesthetics to the course.

Mueller has seen a marked decrease in insects since the bluebird boxes were installed two years ago, and that has meant a reduced need for pesticide use.

"If our greens are destroyed, we would not be open for business," he said. "Last year I did not have to treat (with pesticides) for the insects. É For this year, I will monitor the situation as usual, and if the numbers are high enough to do damage I will treat for them. But if it is like last year, there will be no treatment."

The Hungry Owl Project - sponsored by WildCare in San Rafael - works with individuals, wineries and golf courses to install boxes to attract barn owls, western screech owls, kestrels, bluebirds and bats so they can serve as a nontoxic pest control service.

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"It reduces the need to use pesticides," Godbe said. "It has worked well."

ON THE NET

For more information on the Hungry Owl Project's bluebird program, visit www.hungryowl.org

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Alex Godbe, Director for The Hungry Owl Project, checks Bluebird boxes at the San Geronimo Golf Course, in San Geronimo. (IJ photo/Robert Tong)



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